

Christopher Columbus  
And His Expeditions to America

Simple History series #1:  
Christopher Columbus and His Expeditions to  
America. October, 2006

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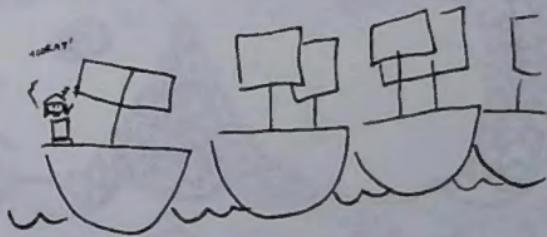
History tells the stories of our past; helping to explain the world we live in today. The events and figures in these stories are not unrelated – there are patterns and recurring themes that still apply today. By examining these stories, by studying these people and events, we can better understand our place in history.

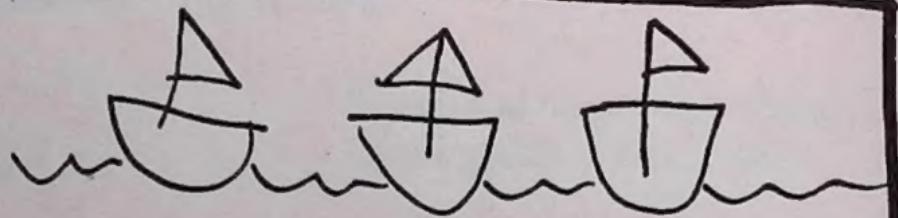
This is the first in a series (hopefully) of Simple History pamphlets designed to be informative and entertaining for interested readers of all ages. All comments, suggestions and feedback are encouraged.

J. Gerlach

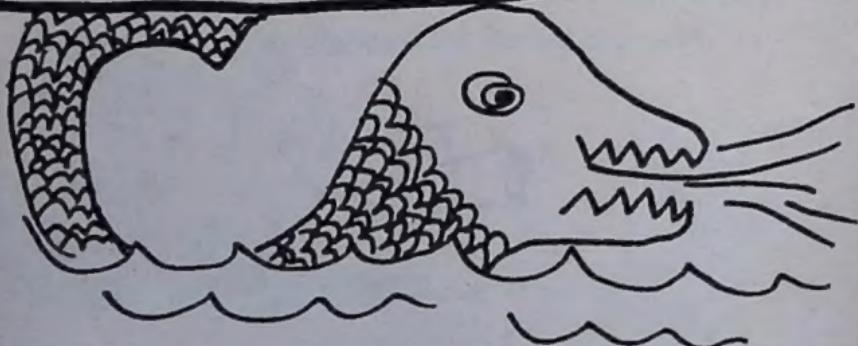
Our story begins in the year, 1492.  
That's the date that everyone learns in school.

— Columbus sailed the ocean blue, in 1492--





But Christopher Columbus had been sailing the seas for many years before 1492. He was one of the most experienced sailors of his time, having already been to Africa, Turkey, the Canary Islands, and even Iceland. Through these adventures Columbus learned many things about the sea and the peoples of the world. When Columbus wasn't at sea he studied the primitive maps of the day and read about other sailors' expeditions. Columbus was a quick learner and had a strong will to succeed. He had a lot of confidence in himself. Now, in 1492, he was ready to lead an expedition into uncharted waters.





This was the period of European history we call "The Renaissance." It was a time when the nations that now make up Europe (like Spain, Portugal and England) were coming together under the power of strong kings and queens. Spain, for example, had consisted of several small kingdoms, containing many religions and ethnicities, until the marriage of Ferdinand, king of Aragon, and Isabella, queen of Castile. From 1479 on, the king and queen worked to expand their power and spread their religion, Catholicism, throughout the land. Eventually, the last of the Moors (Moslems) were driven out of Spain (Grenada was the final Moslem stronghold in Europe). Then a royal decree was signed expelling all Jews. By 1492, after centuries of division, Spain was a united, Catholic nation under the rule of Ferdinand and Isabella.

ATLANTIC  
OCEAN

PARIS

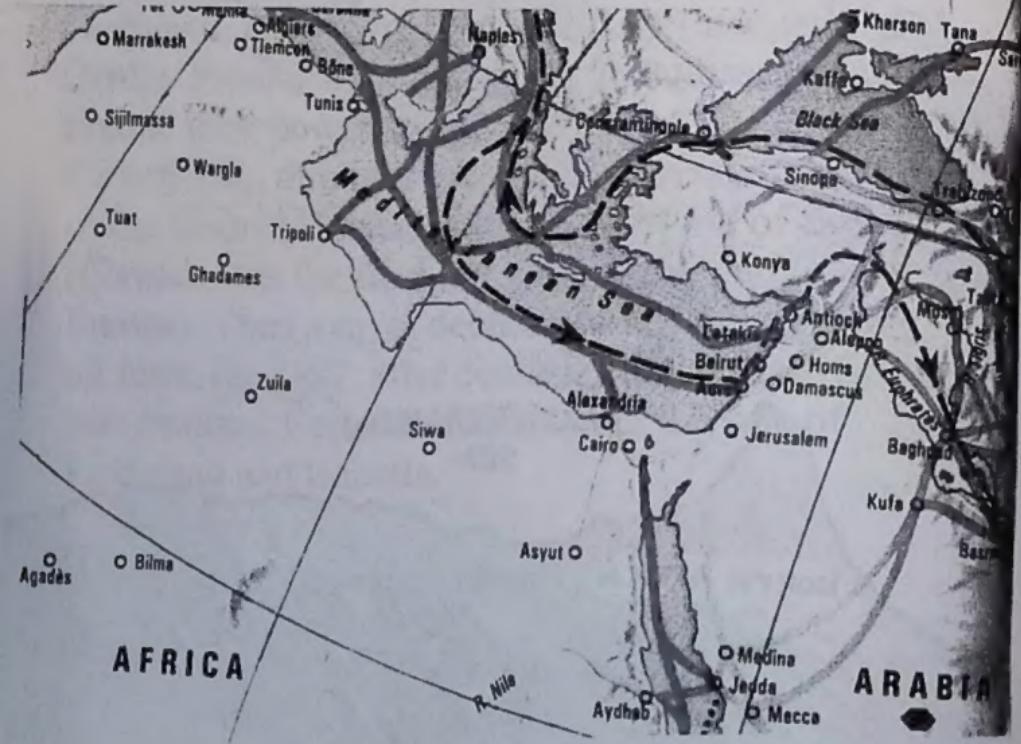
FRANCE



MEDITERRANEAN  
SEA

NORTH AFRICA

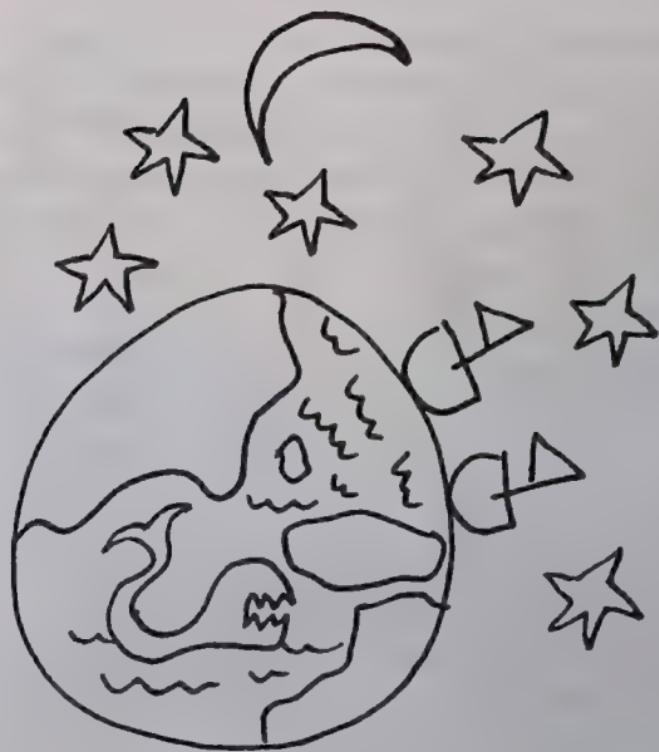
A race was on among the nations of Europe to find new trade routes to the East – the places we now call India, China and Japan. Trade between Europe and the East had been going on for years but now it was becoming even more important. These new nations of Europe needed money to expand their power and trade. Gold was becoming the new mark of wealth in the world and it was rumored that there were great fields of gold in Asia. Up until this time the only way to get to the East from Europe was over land. It took a long time and went through hostile territory.



So, the seacoast countries of Europe were working hard to develop better sailing ships in order to find a water route to these far-off lands. As ships and navigation improved, the European sailors came in contact with new people; whole nations of people who lived in vastly different ways. It was assumed by the European nations that whoever "discovered" an "unclaimed" land first would be the rightful owner of that territory – provided, of course, that the people who were already there could be subdued. This was the beginning of the era of European imperialism – a policy of national territorial expansion.

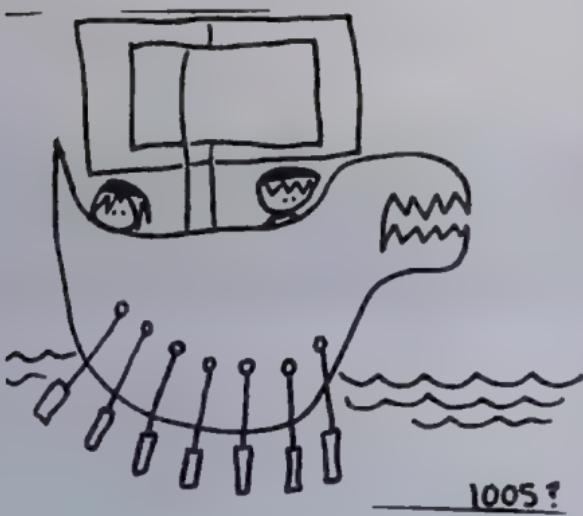
Portugal had jumped out to an early lead in this race. Encouraged and financed by Henry the Navigator, Portuguese captains had already "discovered" many lands along the West African coast where they set up posts to send back ivory, pepper and slaves. By 1492, Portugal was committed to finding the way around the southern tip of Africa to get to the treasures of the East. In 1486, Bartolomeu Diaz, sailing for Portugal, was the first European to round the Cape of Good Hope.

For years, Columbus had been trying to convince the kings and queens of Europe to finance a voyage that would sail west in order to get to the treasures of the East. Columbus, like most people of that time, knew that the Earth was round and that by sailing west, one should eventually reach the coast of Asia.



But no one had ever done it. There were legends of the Vikings of Greenland sailing west and landing in populated lands, sometime around the year 1005.

There is also some evidence of Afro-Phoenician ships that sailed west from present-day Morocco or Egypt and made it to the coast of Mexico, around the year 750 B.C. But if these, or any other explorers had made it across the “Ocean Sea” (now known as the Atlantic Ocean), they didn’t stay long and there were no written records.





A 9 FOOT ROCK  
PORTRAIT (THAT  
LOOKS MUCH  
TOUGHER THAN  
THIS) WAS FOUND  
TO DATE BACK  
TO 750 BC. SOME  
PEOPLE THINK IT  
IS AFRICAN, OTHERS  
SAY IT IS MAYAN  
OR INDIAN.

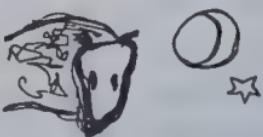


AND SOME PEOPLE  
THINK THIS PRE-  
COLUMBIAN CERAMIC  
FACE LOOKS  
CAUCASIAN OR SEMETIC,  
LIKE MAY BE FROM  
LEBANON OR SYRIA  
OR ISRAEL.

The improvements in shipbuilding and navigation techniques now made it possible to cross the Atlantic. But no one was sure how big the earth was. Columbus' plan was certainly far riskier than following the coast of Africa, always within sight of land. There were legends of sea monsters and boiling waters and all sorts of danger once you were out in the vast sea.

And no one in Europe knew that between Europe and Asia lay two huge continents. These continents, now known as North and South America were inhabited by groups of people that knew nothing about the goings on in Europe.

In 1492, there were millions of Native Americans scattered throughout those two continents. Just like the many different cultures that made up Europe at that time, the people of the Americas lived in very diverse ways. Most lived in small farming, hunting or fishing communities, but there were also large, highly developed cities like those built by the Incas in South America. Unlike European society, the Native American culture that Columbus and his men were about to stumble on was not based on hierarchy or a strong central government. They did not have police or jails. There were no banks or complicated money systems. There was no ownership of land or working for others.



The Europeans, on the other hand, were gaining the upper hand in world trade and military strength. There had been many improvements in business, allowing the Europeans to expand their trade to more and more places. But the merchants and nobles who benefited from these developments were only a small part of the population. Most of the people of Europe were poor and uneducated. They worked the land for someone else and barely made enough to live on.

There was constant war in Europe. One result of this was a huge build up in weapons. By 1492, European armies had swords and guns and big cannons mounted on ships.

Now that European sailors were finding their way to more and more uncharted lands – lands populated by people without steel weapons or armor – they realized how easy it was to take over these territories for their empire. Portugal and Spain, as Catholic nations, also believed it was their God-given duty to convert all unenlightened savages to Christianity. In return, they believed God would grant them riches in the form of gold and land. So when island natives encountered these foreign, heavily armed Europeans, there was nothing they could do to stop them. The invaders took what they wanted in the name of God, and claimed the land for their king and queen.



Since Portugal was committed to finding the route to India by going east, it was Spain who took a chance on Columbus' plan to sail west. He had used his persuasive skills with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella— invoking the name of God quite often while telling of the great riches to be had. The Spanish monarchs, desperate to find gold and their own water route to the East, finally granted Columbus the ships and men he needed.

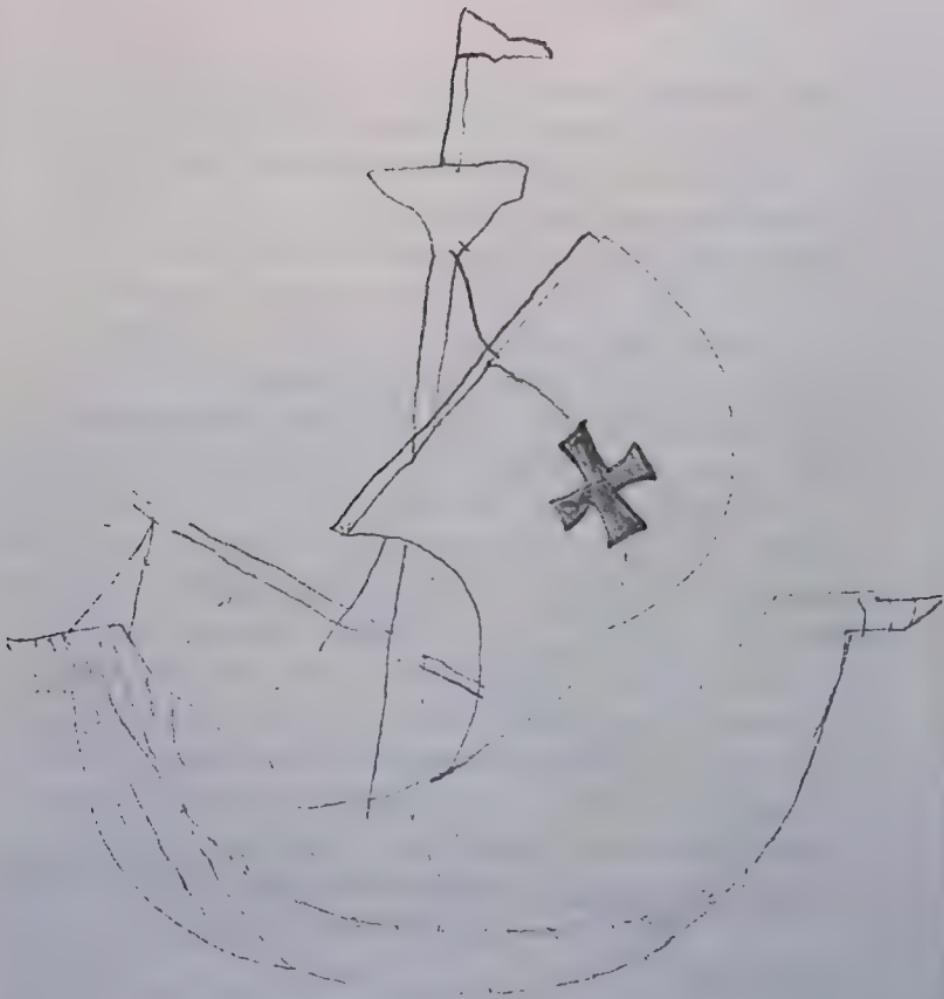
Columbus was given command of a small fleet of three ships – The Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria - and about a hundred men. Ferdinand and Isabella promised Columbus ten percent of any profits from his voyage and gave him the title, “Admiral of the Sea.”

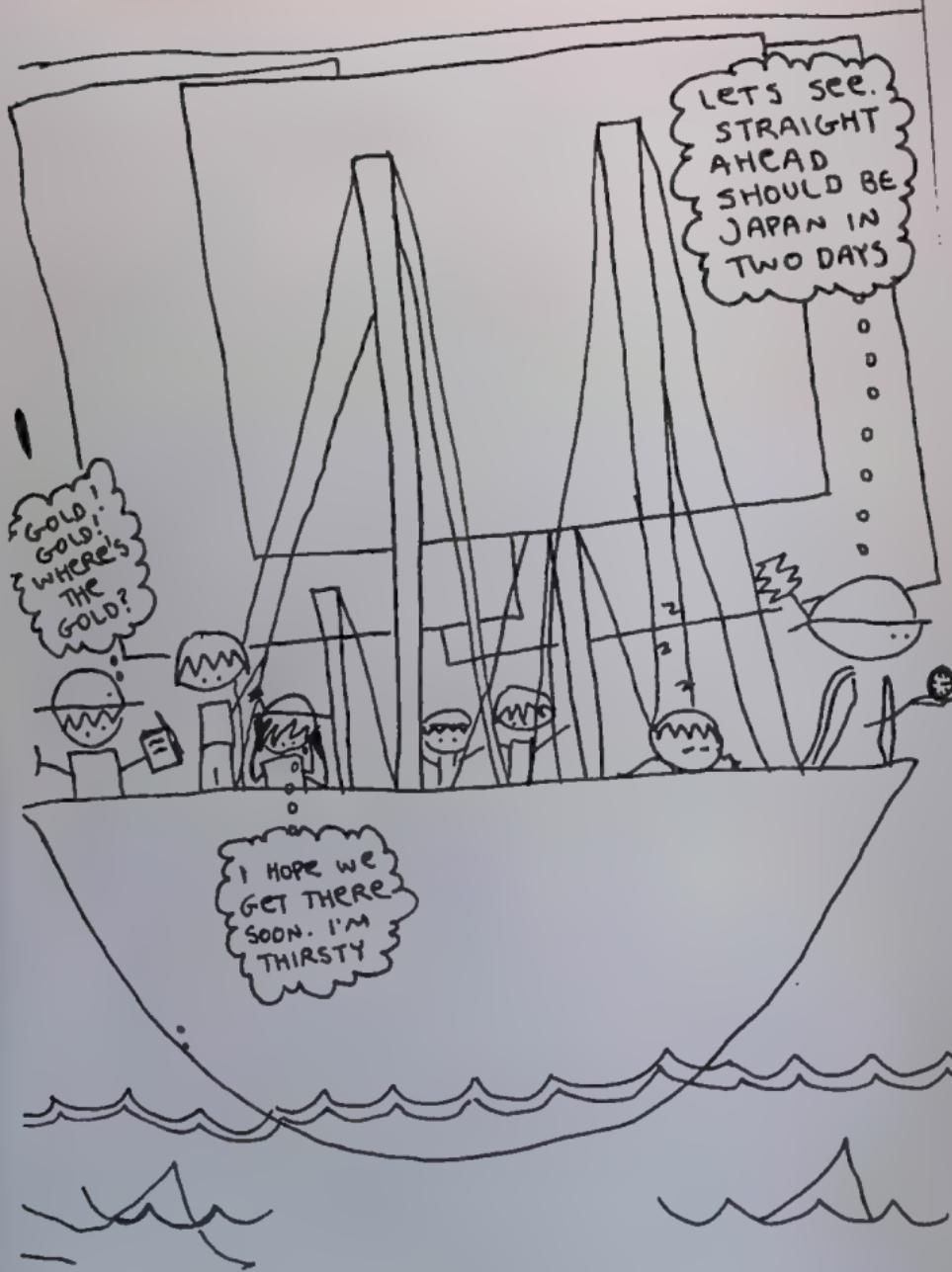




In the late summer of 1492 the fleet set sail for the Canary Islands, a Spanish colony off the coast of Africa. There they would stock up for the hopefully not-too-long voyage across the sea.

The ships were between seventy and a hundred feet long. They were simple sailing vessels called, "caravels", with no sleeping quarters for the sailors and a limited supply of food and drinking water. The men (no women) who made up Columbus' crew were mostly professional sailors. There were also some royal clerks, who's job it was to write down what happened on the journey and to keep track of the valuables they collected.



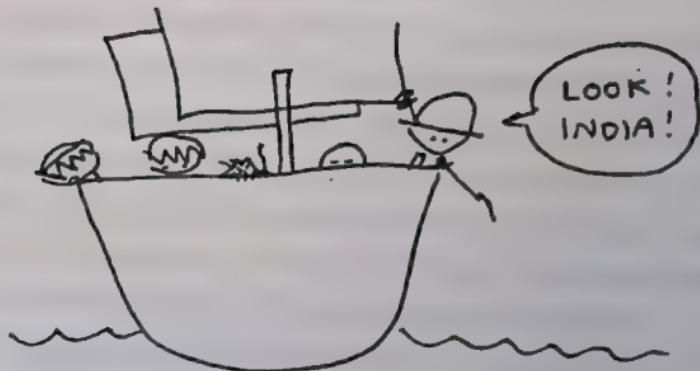


Columbus' expedition left the Canary Islands on September 6, 1492. Two days later they had lost all sight of land and were out in uncharted waters.

Columbus made some educated guesses, aiming for what he hoped would be Japan. Luckily, they sailed right into the trade winds.

We now know about the northeast trade winds, which blow steadily from southern Europe to the Caribbean during summer and winter. Farther north, above the Tropic of Cancer, a different current, the "westerlies", blow west to east, from the North American coast to Europe. These winds are a big reason that Spain and Portugal ended up in Central and South America while English, Dutch and French ships found their way to North America (despite facing a headwind). On this first voyage, it was all new. Columbus didn't know he was being pushed straight for an unknown continent. No one aboard those three ships knew how long it would be before they sighted land again. As the days passed, the crew grew restless and nervous.

Then one early morning, thirty-three days after setting sail, land was spotted. It was a group of islands now known as the Bahamas. These were not islands off the coast of Asia, as Columbus assumed, but tropical islands of the Caribbean Sea, not far from the mainland coast of the Americas.



FLORIDA \_\_\_\_\_  
MILES ↓ THAT  
WAY

Columbus went ashore with the other two captains and claimed the land for Spain. The first natives who encountered Columbus and his men were called the Arawaks. They lived in small village communities on the islands of the Caribbean growing corn, yams and cassava. They knew how to weave but had no horses or work animals. Because of the tropical climate, the Arawaks wore very little clothing.

Columbus reported that the Arawaks (he called them "Indians" because he thought he was in the Indies) were friendly and generous, "they offer to share with anyone." Columbus also noticed some wore small pieces of gold as jewelry. He assumed that the Arawaks knew where there was lots of gold. So, Columbus took a few natives on board and headed off on a search for treasure. They sailed to the nearby islands of Cuba and Hispaniola. There the expedition was again welcomed by Arawaks and given more small pieces of gold as tokens of friendship. But Columbus wanted more.

The expedition spent the next few months sailing around the Caribbean, looking for the Asian mainland and checking out some of the nearby islands. They continued to be astounded by the beauty of the land and the friendliness of the Indians. On each island, in each village, the Arawaks welcomed the sailors and gave them presents. Sometimes these presents were small pieces of gold. Columbus felt that it was only a matter of time before huge amounts of gold were discovered. He also noted that the Arawaks could easily be converted to Christianity and would make fine servants.

“With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

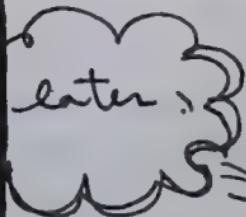
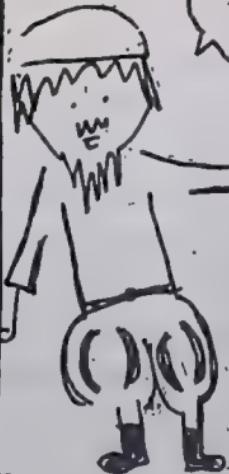


On the island of Hispaniola (shared today by the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Columbus and his men built a fort using the wood from the Santa Maria, which had run aground and was sinking. He left thirty-nine men at this fort and instructed them to look for gold. Columbus decided to take some of the Indians, along with some samples of gold, back to Spain. He hoped it would be enough to be given command of another venture.

The Nina and the Pinta set sail for Europe in January of 1493. It took them a month to sail back across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. Columbus' navigational skills were spotty, but he was even more confident now that he had made the crossing once. He used a compass, the stars, and his sailing experience to set a course for Spain, but the trade winds pushed them farther north. It was winter, and the cold weather caused many of the captured Arawaks to die. Both ships were leaking badly. As the return expedition was nearing the Azores, off the coast of Portugal, they hit a bad storm. The men fought through a long, difficult night before reaching land.



YOU GUYS BUILD THIS  
FORT. I'M GOING  
TO SPAIN TO  
GET MORE  
MONEY



lost  
lost  
lost

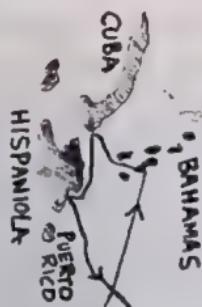


NORTH  
AMERICA

ATLANTIC  
OCEAN

Voyage 1 1492-93

LISBON



AFRICA

CANARY  
ISLES

CITY OF  
MEXICO  
ISLES

SOUTH  
AMERICA

Columbus was given a great reception upon his return to Spain. In his report to Isabella and Ferdinand, Columbus claimed that he had sailed to the East Indies, and then on to Asia (he thought Cuba was too big to be an island so he assumed it was Asia). He told of the many islands he had claimed for Spain, especially Hispaniola. "Hispaniola is a miracle... There are many spices, and great mines of gold and other metals."

The people were described as strong, intelligent and peaceful. "I hope to win them to the love and service of your Highnesses... and make them collect and give us the things which they possess in abundance and which we need."

"In conclusion, to speak of the results of this very hasty voyage, their Majesties can see that I will give them as much gold as they need, if they will give me some very little help."

So a second voyage was planned. This time Columbus was given seventeen ships and over a thousand heavily armed men. These were mostly gentleman adventurers who hoped to find great riches to bring back with them. Some of the fleet's ships planned to turn back for home as soon as they reached the "New World." Columbus sailed from Cadiz, Spain in September of 1493. Again the fleet sailed to the Canary Islands first. From there it took them three weeks to make the crossing.

When this second fleet arrived in the Caribbean, they wandered from island to island, picking up Indians along the way and engaging in at least one battle. Eventually, with the help of some Arawaks, they found Hispaniola again and made their way to the fort they had left behind, nine months ago.

But there was no one there. Through interpreters, Arawaks who had been captured on the first voyage and brought back to Europe to learn Spanish, Columbus learned that all the men he had left behind were dead. In Columbus's absence, these men had roamed the island, looking for gold and taking whatever they wanted. Their actions had grown worse and worse until the local Arawaks couldn't take it anymore.



From here on, things were very different. Word of the Spaniards actions quickly spread around the islands. No longer were the white men greeted and welcomed to Indian villages. Now when Columbus and his men arrived in an Arawak town, they usually found them empty – abandoned by the Indians who had run away rather than face the force of the Spaniards.

The men who sailed with Columbus hadn't come all this way to settle on the islands or make friends with the natives. They wanted gold and were used to fighting to get what they wanted. But the Arawaks were a peaceful people who didn't want to have to fight to defend their way of life. They must have been hoping that the white man give up and go away. Little did they know, this was only the beginning.

CAN WE  
GO HOME  
YET?!

I WANT A  
CUP OF  
TEA

I DON'T SEE ANT  
GOLD!  
WHERE  
ARE  
WE?

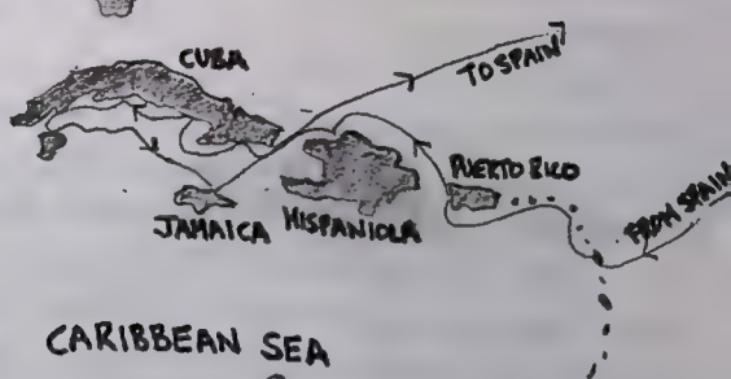


Columbus had a new fort built on a bay in Hispaniola, near some gold fields rumored to be in the area. He named the settlement, 'Isabela' and put his brother, Diego, in charge. Columbus himself led the first, heavily armed search party into the interior of the island. But after a few hot marches into the jungle without finding gold, Columbus decided to get back in the boat and do a little exploring. He took a few ships over to Cuba (which he again assumed was China) and then on to Jamaica. But the weather was bad, many of the crewmembers were sick, and no fields of gold were found.



# VOYAGE 2 1493-94

ATLANTIC  
OCEAN

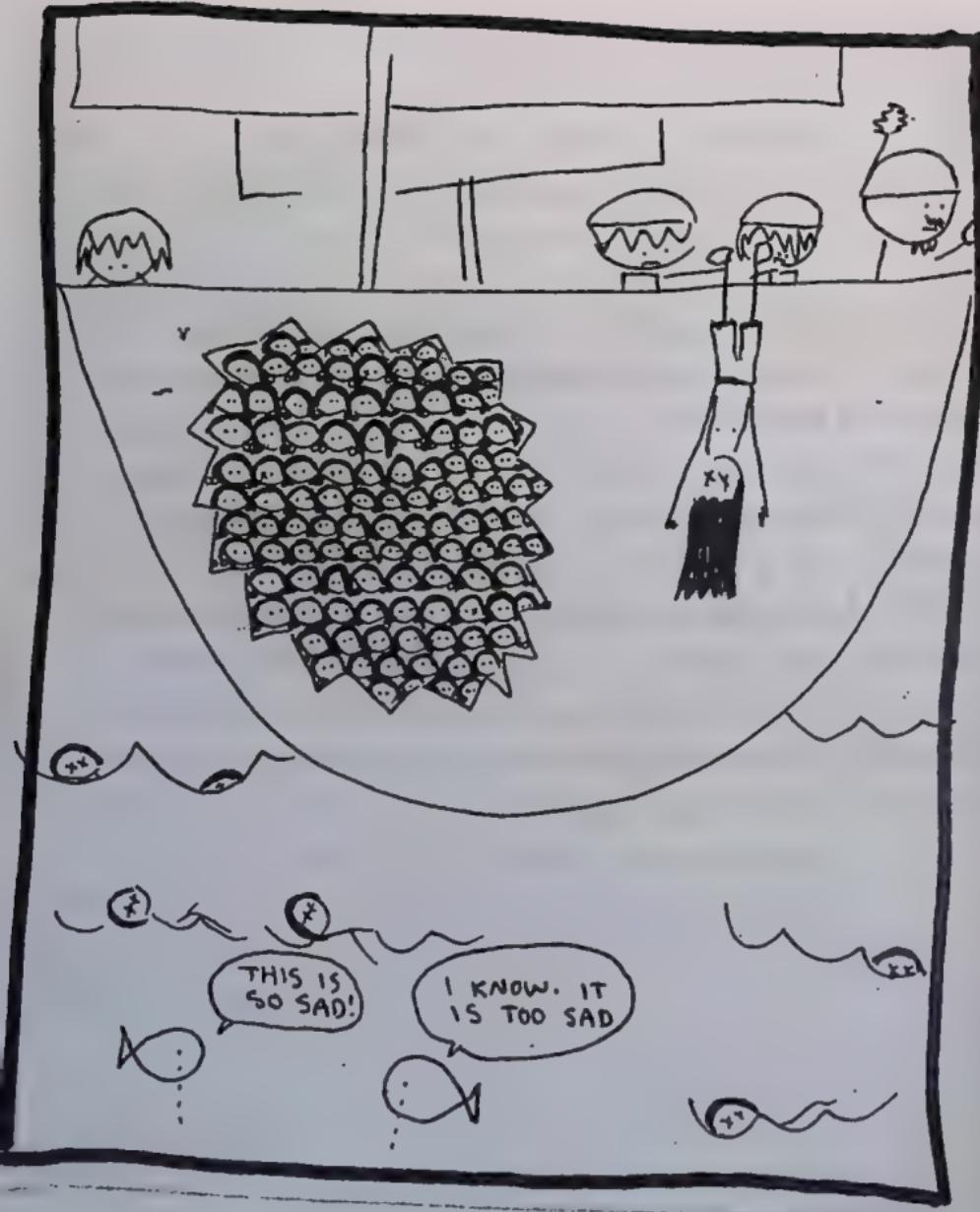


CARIBBEAN SEA

When Columbus returned to Isabela six months later, he was reunited with his brother, Diego, and another brother, Bartolome. Bartolome had sailed over from Spain with three ships full of provisions, sent by Ferdinand and Isabella. Now the Columbus brothers united to take control over the entire island of Hispaniola.

But there had been trouble while Columbus was off sailing around the islands. The men he had left behind had split into groups and gone on raids for gold. There were arguments between the groups and more killing of Arawaks. One of the men, Pedro Margarit, used one of Columbus' ships to sail back to Spain, saying he could no longer stomach the Spaniards treatment of the Indians. He and a few others were back in Spain, trying to persuade the king and queen that Hispaniola was in chaos and that Columbus needed to be recalled.

So, in February of 1495, Columbus was feeling the pressure to return to Spain with some of that fabulous wealth he had promised. He saw only two options – gold or slaves. Since they hadn't had much luck finding gold, he decided to round up as many slaves as they could take back to Spain. Fifteen hundred Arawak men were captured and imprisoned. But the ships could only hold five hundred (if you crammed them in tight) so the strongest were chosen. The next best were used as slaves on the island and the leftovers ran for the hills.



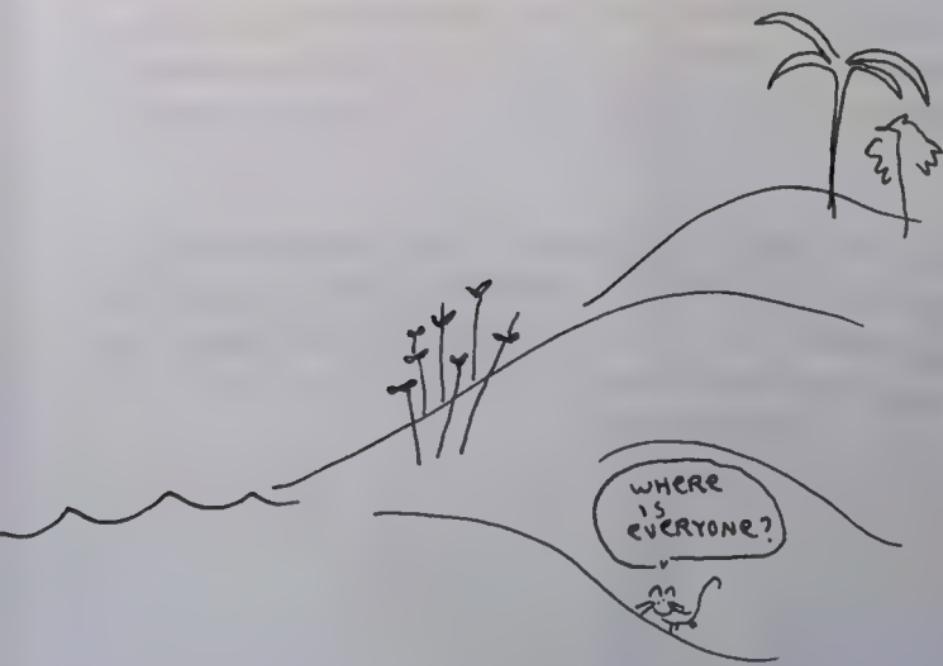
Of the five hundred Arawaks stuffed into the boats, two hundred died before even reaching Spain. The three hundred who made it were sold as slaves in Seville, Spain. This marked the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade.



But Columbus still had gold fever. He wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella, "Gold is the most excellent, gold is treasure, and who has it can do whatever he likes in this world. With it, he can bring souls to Paradise..."

After sending the slave ships back to Spain, Columbus ordered the Arawaks to work as slaves and to bring him gold. A tax was instituted – each Arawak had to bring the Spaniards a certain amount every few months or face brutal punishment. This was an impossible task, as the Arawaks didn't know where there were any big piles of gold. Many Indians died from overwork. Others tried to run away and were hunted down. Some Arawaks even resorted to killing themselves rather than face this kind of life.

In 1492, it is estimated that there may have been as many as three million Arawaks living on the island of Hispaniola. By 1517, twenty-five years after Columbus first arrived, there were only twelve thousand left. By 1555, there were no more Arawaks left on Hispaniola. In little more than fifty years, through warfare, slavery and disease, a whole island nation had been destroyed.



Much of our information about this time and place comes from a Spanish priest named Bartolome de las Casas. Las Casas had come over to Hispaniola on the second voyage with Columbus. He helped in the conquest of Cuba and later owned a plantation with Indian slaves. But at some point, las Casas gave all that up and became a strong critic of Spanish brutality against the Indians. He lived in the Caribbean for over fifty years and wrote books about his experiences and what he witnessed. He transcribed Columbus' journals and wrote a multi-volume "History of the Indies", in which he stated:

"... in a short time this land which was so great, so powerful and fertile... was depopulated... My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write..."

When Columbus sailed back to Spain the second time, in the spring of 1496, he left behind a grumbling, diseased crew in Hispaniola. Their living conditions were hard, the land was strange, and now they had to fight the angry natives. And still they hadn't found any gold.

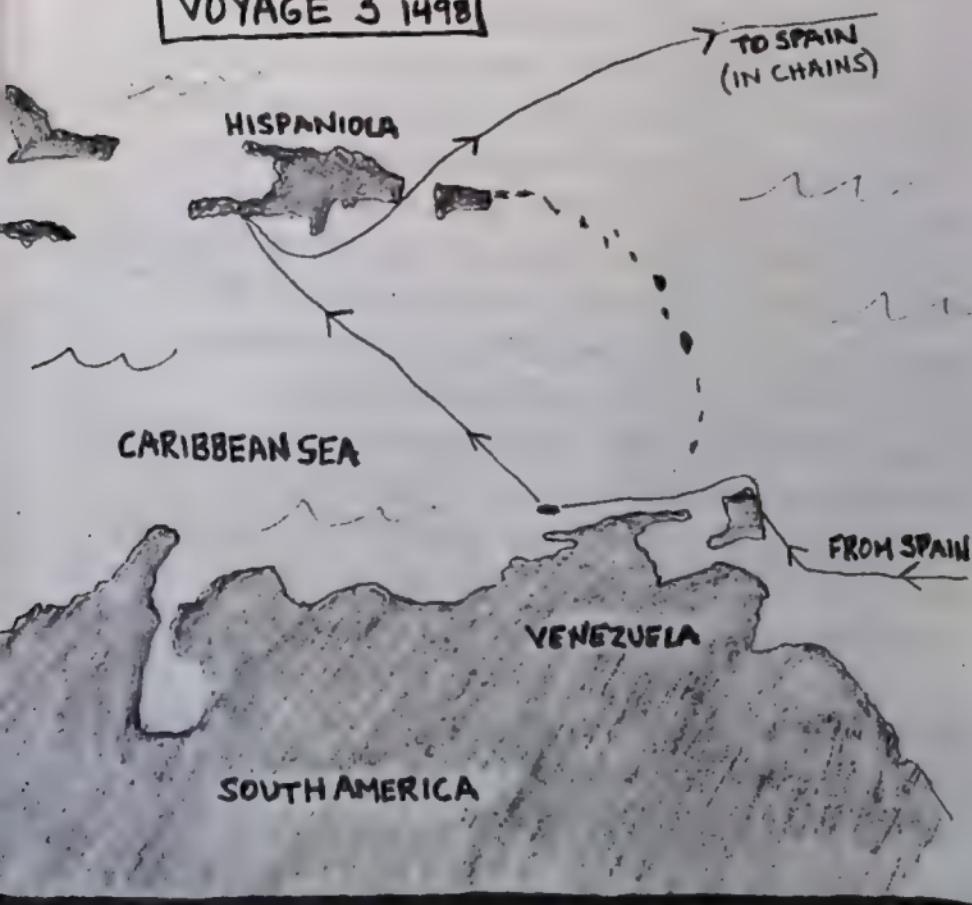
When Columbus arrived back in Spain, he was kept waiting and basically ignored. The King and Queen were disappointed in him. When they finally did agree to see him, Columbus' request to sail again was put off for two more years.



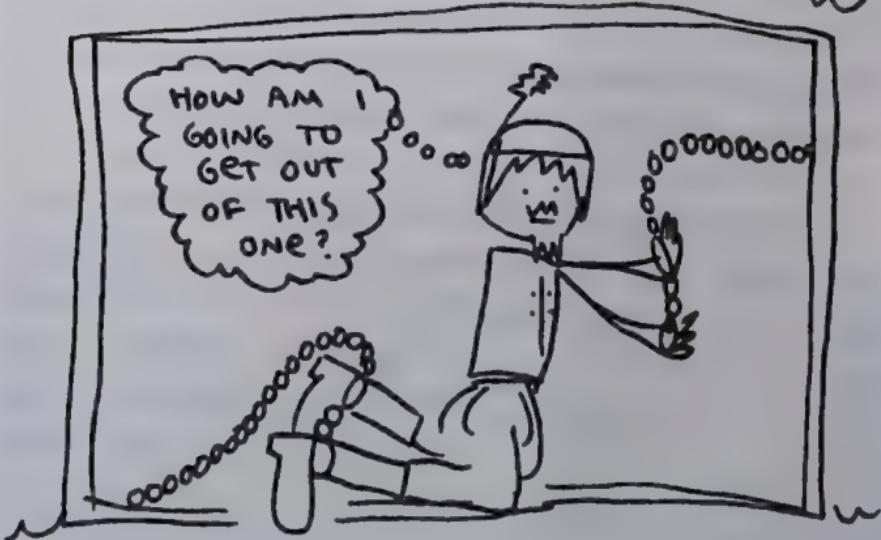
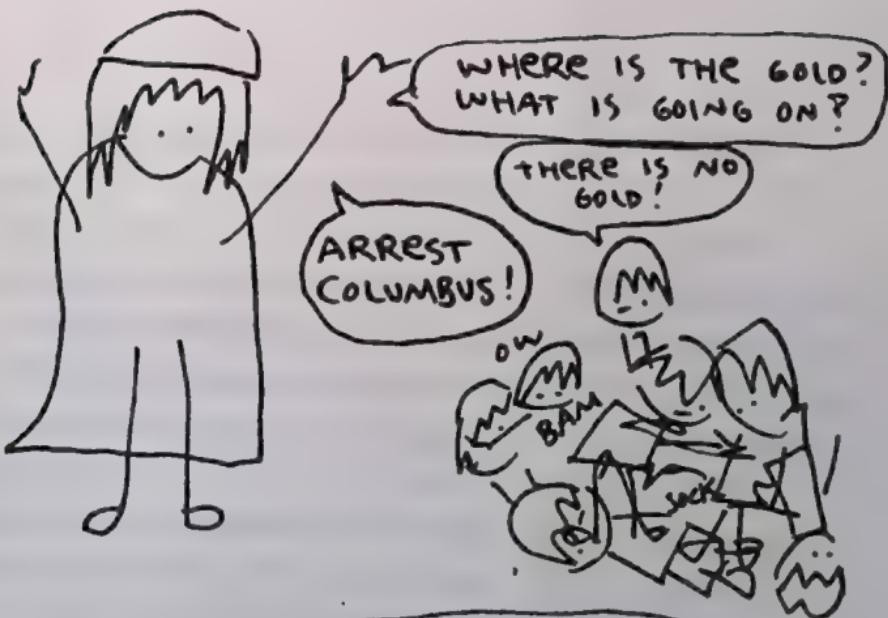
Christopher Columbus did finally reach the mainland of the Americas on his third voyage. The expedition reached the coast of what is now Venezuela, in South America. But he still didn't know if it was Asia or an uncharted landmass. Columbus must have wanted to explore further but a combination of factors made him anxious to get back to Hispaniola. His report of this expedition is filled with confused conclusions, like how the world was shaped like a pear, with part of it raised closer to the sky.

Columbus concluded that the fabled Garden of Eden must lie at this point. He was confused by these unknown lands and was thrown off by the strange currents of the rivers and seas he found. Columbus tried to fit each new discovery into his previous navigational measurements, which had been flawed from the start.

VOYAGE 3 1498



When Columbus returned to Hispaniola this time he found things in even worse shape. The Indians were dying by the thousands and the Spaniards were brawling over what little wealth they had turned up. The three Columbus brothers were fighting mutinous Spaniards and desperate Arawaks at the same time. Still there had been no great gold discoveries. Isabella and Ferdinand were sick and tired of hearing all these great reports but not seeing any of the goods. In the summer of 1500, a commissioner named Francisco de Bobadilla was sent to Hispaniola to see what was going on. Ferdinand and Isabella gave him full powers to take over if necessary. Bobadilla found a chaotic scene upon his arrival in Hispaniola, with some of his fellow Spaniards swinging from the gallows as punishment for rebellion. Bobadilla stopped this practice immediately and eventually had the three Columbus brothers arrested. Christopher and his brothers were sent back to Spain, bound in chains.



But Columbus wasn't giving up yet. Back in Spain, he defended himself by painting Bobadilla as a wicked man who stole the gold stash that Columbus has been saving for the king and queen.

“In Spain, they judge me as if I had been governor of... a province or city under an established government... This is most unjust. I should be judged as a captain sent from Spain to the Indies to conquer a numerous and warlike people...”

He also stated that, “The gate is open for gold and pearls, and we can expect large quantities of precious stones, spices, and other things.”

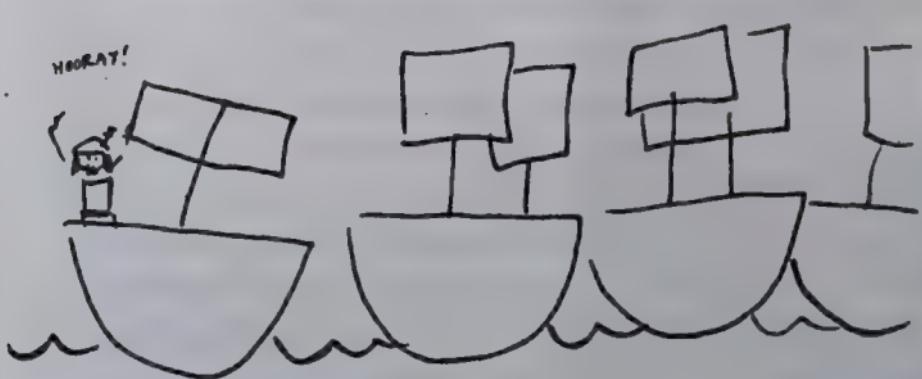
In the eight years since Columbus' first Atlantic crossing, Vasco da Gama, sailing for Portugal, had finally been successful in making it to India by sailing east, around the tip of Africa. Ferdinand and Isabella had stepped up their own expeditions to the west, sending many ships across the Atlantic. The plunder of the Americas was now being carried by its own momentum. Columbus was no longer respected or needed. Ferdinand and Isabella gave command of the next expedition to Hispaniola to Nicolas de Ovando. Ovando commanded a fleet of thirty-one ships, with over two thousand men. With this expedition, Hispaniola would become completely "pacified", meaning that the Indians (or "savages" as the Arawaks were now referred to) would no longer be able to put up a fight to defend their land. Hispaniola would soon become the staging ground for the plunder of Cuba, and for the later conquistador invasion of mainland Central and South America.

After much pleading Columbus was given one last chance to piece together the mystery of finding the westerly route to Asia. The Spanish royal court was desperate to find its own route to India. They had little to lose, especially since Columbus knew his way around the “New World”.

However, there would be a few conditions :

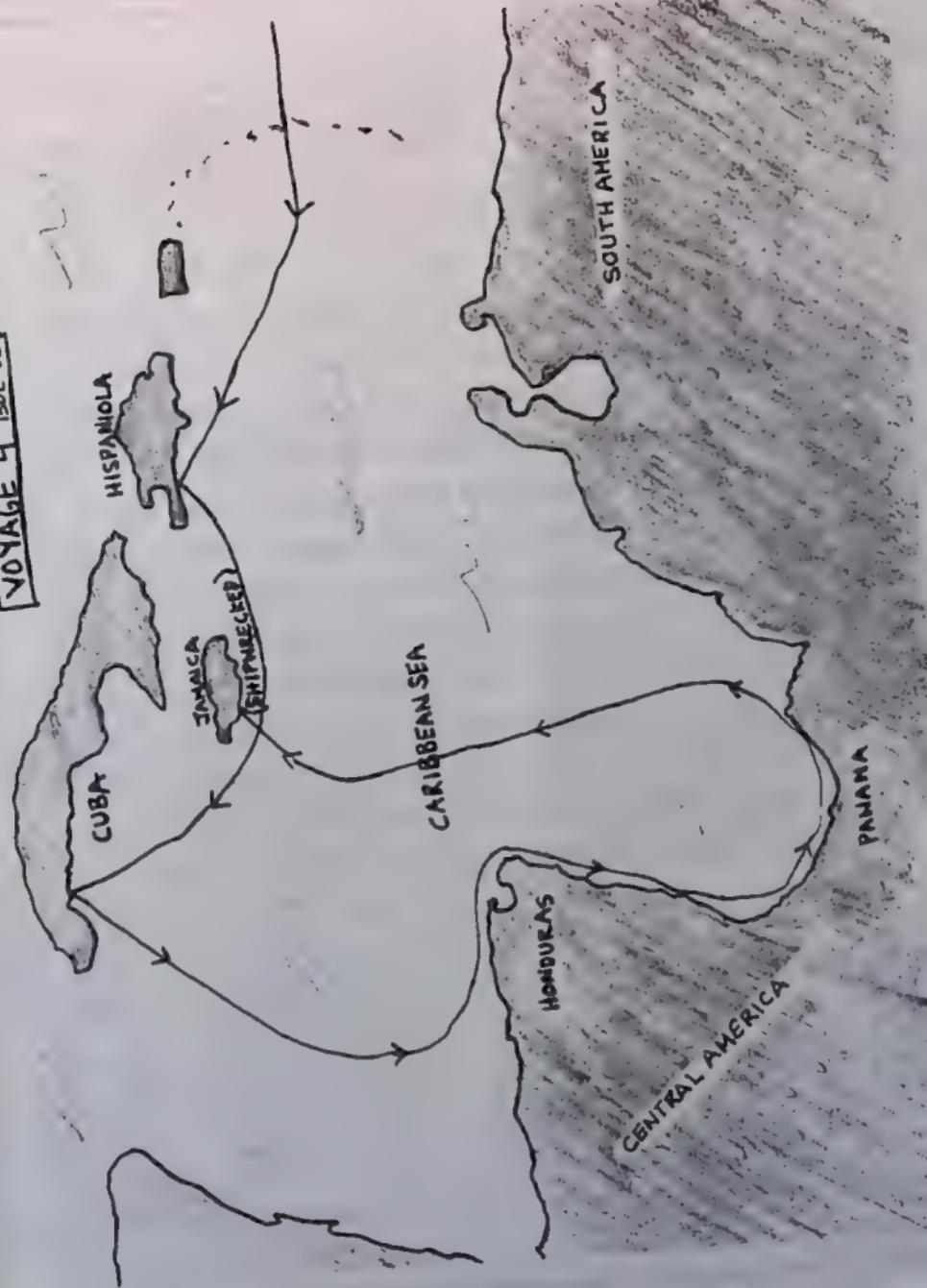
1. Stay out of Hispaniola.
2. No slave-grabbing.
3. And this time the King and Queen would send along their own royal notary to count all the gold, just so there wouldn't be any fighting or accounting mistakes.

Columbus had little choice but to agree. He desperately wanted to find the westerly route to Asia. And so, once again, Columbus predicted great things, announcing that he would meet da Gama in the East Indian seas. His fourth and final expedition set sail from Spain in May of 1502, with four ships.



Christopher Columbus was now in his mid-fifties, nearing the end of his sailing career. All those hours at sea, along with the general feeling in Spain that he had failed, had taken its toll on Columbus. His rationality at this point seems to have been a little sketchy. This fourth voyage, instead of being the final success in finding the route to the East Indies, was full of setbacks. The fleet made it across the Atlantic swiftly but hit a storm in the Caribbean. Columbus wanted to seek safety on Hispaniola but Ovando refused him permission to land. After riding out this storm at sea, Columbus and his men landed in Cuba. From there they continued sailing west, reaching what is now known as Honduras, in Central America. The expedition spent months sailing along the Central American coast, eventually making it to present day Panama. Columbus' description of this journey is filled with visions and direct contact with God. He also makes claims of finding gold mines "beyond belief." In reality, the fleet found nothing more than a coast of humid jungle.

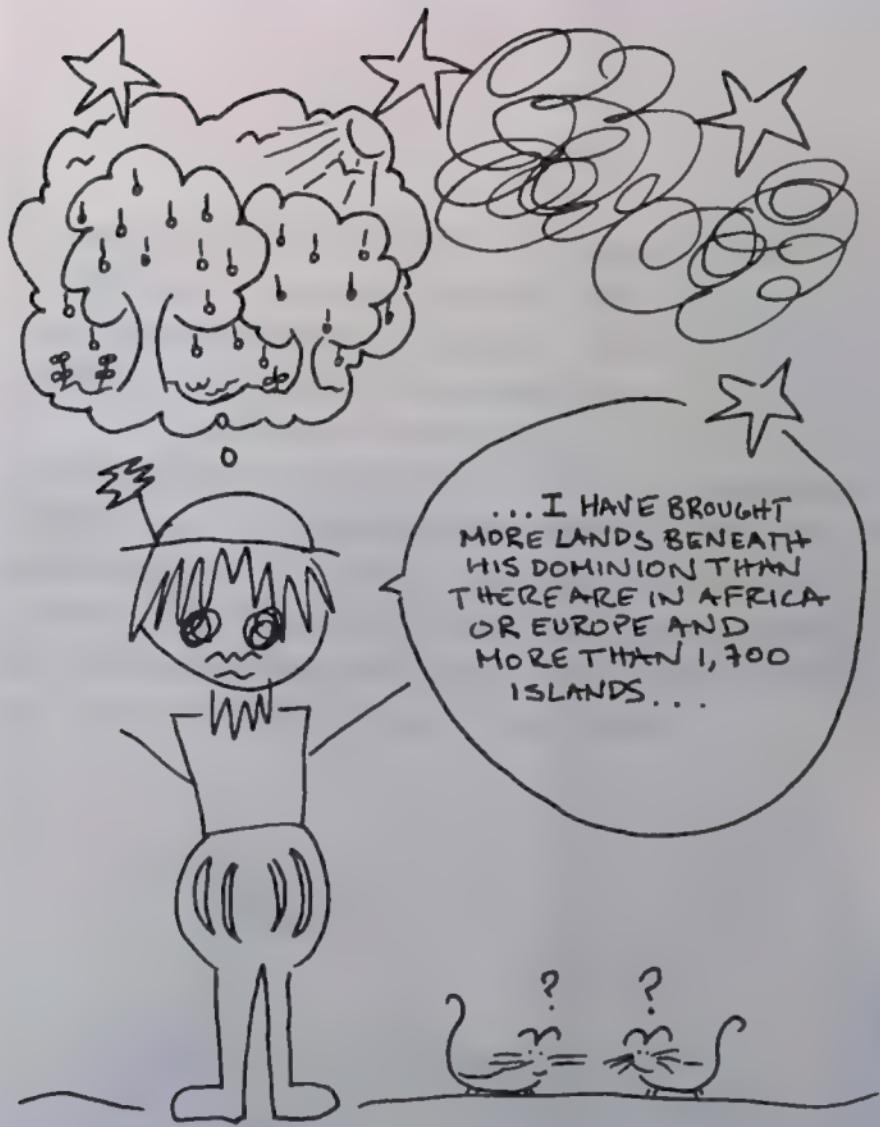
VOYAGE 4 1502-03



They tried to set up a base and look for gold, but the usual scenario played out. The natives went from friendly to hostile as the Spaniards made inland raids for gold. Prisoners were taken – most died, committed suicide or tried to escape. Columbus finally gave up and headed for Jamaica. On Jamaica, the ships ran aground and the Spaniards were stuck. They sent to Hispaniola for help from their Spanish comrades but Ovando was in no hurry to send a rescue party. Columbus and his crew remained stuck in Jamaica for a whole year. Unable to build a rescue boat or live off the land, they were kept alive by the unhappy natives who were forced to feed their invaders.



This is where our story ends. Columbus did make it back to Spain, where he died a wealthy man, in May of 1506. But it is here, shipwrecked on the island of Jamaica, that Columbus must have known that it was all over. He and his men were tired and beaten. Columbus knew that he had done all he could do. It is here that Columbus wrote most of those words about mystical visions and the Garden of Eden. He claimed to have discovered many important lands and routes. He may not have succeeded in finding the westerly route to the East Indies, but he desperately wanted to show everyone that he had been important.



Columbus' importance is debatable. His drive and courage put him in position to "discover" America, but his greatness depends on your definition of the word, "great." Over the years Columbus has become known as a hero – a great explorer and the "discoverer" of America. His expeditions did mark the first lasting interactions between the people and cultures of Europe and America, but what was made of those interactions? How did those first encounters set the foundation for us as "Americans" today?



South of the border, October 12 is known as, 'Dia de la Raza' - the Day of the Race. It is celebrated in honor of the race that now exists in Latin America – a mixture of Indian, Spanish and African stock.

In the United States, October 12 is celebrated as 'Columbus Day', even though Columbus never set foot on what would become the U.S.A.

Christopher Columbus is one of only two individuals (Martin Luther King is the other) who have a national holiday celebrated in their honor.

THE END

Source material and suggested reading:

- Columbus: His Enterprise, by Hans Koning, 1976
- Christopher Columbus and the First Voyages to the New World, by Stephen C. Dodge, 1991
- Columbus and the World Around Him, by Milton Meltzer, 1990
- Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James W. Loewen, 1995
- A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn, 1980

